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Female Initiation in Northern Italian Versions of "Cinderella"

DANIELA PERCO

In this essay I propose to examine forty-five versions belonging to the "Cinderella Cycle" (Rooth 1951); most of these have been collected in the last twenty years in Veneto and other regions of Northern Italy (Trentino, Friuli, Lombardy), while a few come from Northern Italian immigrant communities in Southern Brazil.[1] All of these tales represent more or less explicitly the theme of initiation: the heroine goes from puberty to sexual adulthood and eventually achieves the status of a married woman. I could go as far as saying that these Cinderella plots constitute somewhat of a compendium of the trials and situations that "girls" must confront in order to become integral members of society. My project is to rethink the structural patterns of these tales by identifying their sub-type distinctions and, at the same time, to sharpen Aleksandr I. Nikiforov's definition of two

1. Some of these folktales can be found at the Discoteca di Stato in Rome, Italy and are included in *Tradizioni orali non cantate. Primo inventario nazionale per tipi, motivi o argomenti;* nineteen versions were collected for Tescari (1964); the others I have transcribed and published (Perco 1981), or they come from my personal archives. The Brazilian communities I mention are fairly homogeneous and were established in the South of Brazil (Rio Grande do Sul and S. Catarina) toward the end of the nineteenth century. The isolation of these communities has allowed for a relatively high preservation of the original Italian dialects and traditions; see Perco (1979).

All the original quotations in my texts are in Northern Italian dialects and so are the titles of the Cinderella tales I am discussing: their meaning is not evident to Italians who do not speak these dialects.

I have also examined tales collected by nineteenth-century folklorists in Italy and other relevant works: Andrews (1892); Marson (1984; from an 1883 manuscript); Prati (1925); Schneller (1867); De Rossi (1984; first edition, 1912); Ive (1888); Coltro (1978); Tiraboschi (1977; from an 1883 manuscript); Visentini (1879); D'Aronco (1957); Falassi (1980) and others.

Part of my argument in this essay appears in my earlier study of these tales (1989).

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kinds of "female folktale" as it applies to a specific society; to show how the different "Cinderella" sub-types articulate key oppositional paradigms (low/high, appearing/being); and to discuss the gendered social function of these tales within a specific Northern Italian tradition of storytelling.

I. Recognizing and Reclassifying "Cinderella" Sub-types

Of the forty-five narratives I examined, twenty-five follow the narrative development of AT 510A ("Cinderella" proper) quite clearly, while if, as Aarne and Thompson propose (1961), we consider T411.1 (Lecherous Father) to be the distinguishing motif in AT 510B, only five can be said to belong to the "Cap o' Rushes" sub-type. Since the narratives were collected in Northern Italy, this classification would corroborate earlier findings (see D'Aronco 1957) which showed the prevalence of AT 510B in Southern Italy and its geographical incompatibility with AT 510A. More recent field research conducted in several regions of Italy (including the interesting case of Sardinia), however, seems to invalidate such conclusions, suggesting that the two sub-types coexist in the same areas and, further, that their plots are closely and systematically linked (Rapallo 1972–73).[2] It is this overlapping and convergence that I wish to foreground in my analysis, starting with a reinterpretation of the "Lecherous Father" motif.

The remaining fifteen narratives, in fact, lack the motif of persecution by an incestuous father, but present plots otherwise analogous to AT 510B, in which the heroine is banished from her paternal household. This expulsion may be the result of: a) maltreatment on the part of Cinderella's mother, stepmother or stepsisters; b) the need to look for work elsewhere in order to survive economically; c) the stepmother's refusal to take care of her husband's children, which forces him to abandon them in the woods; and d) Cinderella's decision to leave home to look for a husband.[3] Some of these motifs

2. The oral tradition of "Cinderella" is best documented in Sardinia, where in 1972–73 fifty-six versions had already been collected and classified. Chiarella Rapallo, who studied the geographical distribution and characteristics of AT 510, analyzed some Sardinian versions that spread all the way to the Balkans and Greece (see Xanthakou 1988); their meaning revolves around cannibalism and matricide; often they present one of the following episodes: 1. Cinderella kills her mother so as to make it possible for a widow to marry her father; 2. when Cinderella's older sisters decide to kill their old and unproductive mother and then to eat her flesh, Cinderella attempts to help her mother, who, after her death, becomes the girl's magic helper (Rapallo 1972–73).

3. Only in one of the versions does Cinderella leave home to find a husband (Tescari 1964:168–73). She encounters the sun, moon and wind; they give her magical objects; when she arrives at her future husband's palace, she is taken in to take care of the hearth.

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pertain to other tale types, such as "Snow White" (AT 709), "The Maiden without Hands" (AT 706), and "The Search for the Lost Husband" (AT 425): significantly, in all cases the motif is functional to the heroine's departure. Within this context, then, the Lecherous Father is one of the many possible causes of the heroine's departure, rather than a significantly different motif which has classifying repercussions. The distinctive opposition is not maltreatment by stepmother/persecution by incestuous father, but the presence/absence of the heroine's alienation from her father's house (represented in different versions as flight, persecution, departure, or abandonment).[4]

To consider the heroine's departure as the determining difference between "Cinderella" sub-types has two important consequences. First, the sub-types "X" and "Y" (as we shall call them) reproduce Russian folklorist Nikiforov's description of two kinds of "female folktale," one based on "suffering inflicted upon an innocent persecuted heroine," the other based on "procurement" (in most cases of a fiancé, yet resembling the morphology of the "male folktale") (Nikiforov 1973:89).[5] The heroine in sub-type Y is much more active than the victim in sub-type X. Second, the semantics of these tales' titles becomes clearer and can be seen to point to the different thematic developments of the two sub-types.

II. Searching for Lost Meanings: Titles and Hearths

Contrary to most traditional oral Italian folktales, which simply present an *incipit,* the tales in question are clearly marked by an anthroponym. The most common titles are *Zendraréla, Scindiroeura, Zinisine, Cinisintula, Maria del Tsender, Conza senare, Cuzza senare* and, as A. Rooth has already noted (1951:110), they are only used when the heroine's connection with the hearth is explicit in the narrative, which is not surprising since all these untranslatable anthroponyms

4. Rapallo also maintains the importance of "flight" to the classification of "Cinderella" subtypes, but she groups the versions in which motif T.411.1 is missing with the AT 510A, which she then subdivides into two (1972–73:77).

5. Nikiforov's essay was first translated into English in 1973; two years later another translation was issued. I refer to the first translation. Heda Jason has reformulated some of his ideas (1977:39–40); Ilana Dan (1977:13–30) and Glauco Sanga have applied his categories to the morphological and structural study of folktales. Sanga in particular singles out a sub-category of female tales, those of "enchantment" in which the hero is always a passive woman and the functions of lack or villainy and prohibition/violation of prohibition take on specific characteristics tied with the heroine's subjection to a magic spell and her transformation into a plant, apple, etc. (Sanga 1972:292–6 and 1973:160–196).

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explicitly refer to the *ashes* and the fireplace. In general, this is significant for two reasons: first, only anthroponyms with a specific and motivated, functional meaning appear in folktales; second, proper names are used to mark only the questing hero, the victim or the object of the quest. In other words, the folktale employs anthroponyms to express in condensed fashion the essence and function of certain characters (see Milillo 1983). More specifically, when looking at the titles of other oral "Cinderella" versions from Italy such as *La Paracacò* (the chicken keeper), *Maria Ortighedda* (Cork Maria), *Betta Pilusa* (Hairy Betta), *Maria di Legno* (Wooden Maria), *Sandröe Burdöch* (Cockroach Sandrina), we can see that they share with the hearth anthroponyms references to a lesser or inferior world, be it that of animals or plants. Whether they mention the hearth or not then, these "Cinderella" titles privilege the articulation of a high vs. low opposition (Meletinski 1977:85) as symbolized by the heroine at her most degraded.

If we believe that titles can indicate informants' awareness of analogies and meanings at work in different "Cinderella" tales, then focusing on the hearth anthroponyms in particular may yield interesting information. Storytellers who include in their repertoire the persecuted-at-home Cinderella (sub-type X) and the Cinderella-who-leaves (sub-type Y) tend to differentiate more strongly between them by giving them different titles, nevertheless making the connection with ashes in both. For example, in Lombardy tellers uphold the distinction between *Scindiroeura* (X) and *Scindirin-Scindiroueu* (Y) (Imbriani 1877[1976]); in Friuli, between *Zinisine* (X) and *Cinisintula brustulintula* (Y) (Zorzut 1924–27); and in Veneto, between *Cuciasendre* and *Sendrarola* or between *Cuzza sènare* (X) and *Conza sènare* (Y) (Bernoni 1968[1873]). As for the last two anthroponyms, they are also present in the areas of Istria and Dalmatia (Ive 1888), and the collector G. Bernoni in 1873 placed in a footnote a telling comment made by an anonymous female narrator: "Questa che ghe conto la xé la fiaba della Conza senare. Quella della Cuzza senare la xé un'altra. La ghe somegia ma no la xé questa" ("The story I'm telling you is *Conza senare*'s; *Cuzza senare* is different. It resembles the *Conza senare* but it is not the same").

Here, I wish to dwell on the meaning of these two names/titles. In the dialect of Veneto, the medium of these tales, the verb *conzar* translates "to set up, to tidy up, to arrange"; the *Conza senare* is literally

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the one who puts order to things, fixes them up (Boerio 1856, entry *conzar*). This anthroponym does not seem to hold negative connotations, but to indicate a cleaning-type of activity which does by nature involve getting dirty. The heroine who is abandoned in the forest or leaves home in search of a job or is persecuted by her father or stepmother is the one who seeks employment as *Conza senare* and consequently accepts the consequences of her work. In some versions from Veneto, she leaves home and is hired to sift ashes that will then be used to do laundry. The *Conza senare* asks her magic wand (bestowed on her by an old woman) to give her a dress that is appropriate to the job, something waterproof: a pigskin appears. Similarly, in the *Scindiroeura* collected by Vittorio Imbriani in 1871 in Lombardy, the young girl first offers her services as lady in waiting; when she is turned down, she begs the queen to hire her as a "Cinderella," "a sta a i fornell, a i fogolar a toeu su la zener" ("to stay near the stove, near the fireplace to collect the ashes") (Imbriani 1976[1877]:160).

Cuzza senare has a remarkably different meaning. The verb *cuzzar* designates crouching, curling up, sleeping; *cuzza senare* is used for youngsters or animals that like sleeping near the fireplace, huddling in the ashes; in a figurative sense the term refers to a lazy, indolent person who is mentally dull.[6] This anthroponym, translated by A. B. Rooth as "female cat" (*cuzza* = *gatta*),[7] seems to emphasize the heroine's marginalization and passivity. Curled upon the ashes, in a position similar to a pet's, and so reduced to an animal-like condition, the heroine is restricted to the area surrounding the fireplace, which is also her bed. Some oral versions specify that the *Cuzza senare*'s stepmother "ha preso una bracciata di paglia e l'ha messa per lei in un angolo del focolare" ("produced an armful of straw and put it in a corner of the hearth for her") or that she told the girl when she turned fourteen or fifteen: "bene! tu non andrai mai via, ti metterò sempre al focolare . . . non andrai mai fuori, farai tutti i lavori qua in cucina" ("good! you will never leave; I will always keep you by the fire . . . you will never go out, and you will do all of your chores here in the

6. See Migliorini and Pellegrini (1971), entry *Kuzazendre;* Boerio (1856), entry *Cuzzacenere;* Tomasi (1983), entry *Kuzazendre.*

7. See Rooth (1951:113). Actually the terms *cuzza* and *gatta* do not hold the same meaning, but may be considered to be equivalent to one another in these tales. In Basile's Southern Italian version, Gatta Cenerentola (Cat Cinderella) is sleeping near the fireplace, like *Cuzza senare,* and her name (cat) marks her animal-like condition (1974; first edition 1634–36).

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kitchen") (Tescari 1964:117).[8] The place she is confined to contributes to the heroine's apparent brutishness and stupidity (which, like the ashes, conceal her true being).

The distinction made by the *cuzza/conza* opposition in the titles and its thematization in the stories suggest that the *Cuzza senare* sub-type X privileges *permanence* and *passivity* while the *Conza senare* sub-type Y is marked by the heroine's *departure* and *activity*. While both Cinderellas have a close relationship with the ashes and the hearth which define their status, they react differently to events. More specifically, the permanence/departure and passivity/activity paradigms determine the nature of the heroines' tasks and the significance of clothing in their processes of initiation.

III. Contextualizing Tasks and Clothing

Forced by intolerable situations (her father's desire to marry her or her stepmother's and stepsisters' mistreatment, caused for instance by her having too many suitors) (Coltro 1978:60), *Conza senare* takes the initiative and, at times with a godmother's mediation, goes out to look for work, protection, accommodations. *Cuzza senare,* on the contrary, takes no initiative and only a very specific kind of external intervention (dead mother, Virgin Mary, fairy, or old—in some cases—repulsive—women or men) can change her situation.

Heavy housework is imposed on *Cuzza senare* and by it she must demonstrate the domestic skills required of every girl who wishes to marry. The light activity of sorting grains appears only in one version: her "domesticity" seems confined to basics.[9] The *Conza senare* of subtype Y has an analogously close relationship with the hearth—the domestic place *par excellence*—but she undergoes a more complex initiation. At first, she is forbidden to do certain kinds of chores, in particular the cooking. The tasks she must fulfill (saddling and bridling her young master's horse, polishing his boots or combing his hair) aim once again at establishing whether or not she is capable of taking care of her future husband. The violation of the cooking interdiction (along with her transformed appearance) is what eventually allows her to reveal her true identity. Preparing food (which in some cases involves real culinary ability as in kneading dough to make

8. This version, collected by Tescari, was told by Emma Bonomo in Anguilaro (1964).
9. On this task's symbolism see Vehse (1981:50–52) and Bausinger (1955:144–55).

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crusty breads, preparing panada or a nourishing soup to help the prince gain back his strength) sanctions her entry into her future husband's family and demonstrates that *Conza senare* has successfully completed all her "femininity/domesticity" tests, under the vigilant eye of her future mother-in-law.

Cuzza senare is forced to hide her appearance under rags and ashes, which prevents her from becoming sexually desirable and leaving the home to enter the marriage game. *Conza senare,* on the other hand, must hide her much too enticing beauty, for it has aroused her father's incestuous desire; or it could be dangerous when she is outside her home, for instance, in the woods. She disguises herself sometimes with rags and ashes, but more often with the hide of an animal, the bark of a tree, a "cupboard" in Straparola's literary version, or an old woman's wrinkled skin. Out of her father's house, she is temporarily hurtled into a state of "nature," highlighted by the forest, animal hides, etc.; her manipulation of fire, ashes, and eventually food in her future husband's home, together with the transformation of her clothes, confirms her integration into "culture," her successful initiation.

In either case, the process leads to marriage and dramatizes the low/high opposition, but the heroine's personal involvement is qualitatively different. *Cuzza senare*'s initiation occurs in the paternal home: she leaves it only to go to the ball; and her metaphorical association with the lesser world and animals is achieved domestically (*in domu,* at home). *Conza senare*'s apprenticeship takes place in her future home and presents a wider variety of tasks; she moves out into an unfamiliar world and her naturalizing disguise is more radical than *Cuzza*'s.

Differentiating between sub-type X and Y also confirms that clothing in "Cinderella" stories is not simply an embellishment, but a thematic element functional to the development of the tale. In his essay "Der Aschenputtel-Ziklus," Max Lüthi has argued that the opposition of *Schein* (appearance) and *Sein* (being) constitutes the foundation of AT 510 and, more in general, that it occurs in a number of folktales (1980:53). And Italo Calvino discusses clothing as the narrative thread unfolded in the Cinderella Cycle, by pointing out how *overdressing* is played out in AT 510A and *underdressing* in AT 510B (1978:386).[10] Dress is central to both *Cuzza senare* and *Conza senare*

10. The importance of clothing and dress has also been emphasized in a semiotic reading of the tale (Courtès 1976:109–38).

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tales, but its uses differ; in sub-type X it works to conceal social and moral being; in sub-type Y it serves more subtly to reveal Cinderella's true being.

In sub-type X, the heroine is a ragamuffin, a "Tatterhood." Her stepmother keeps her poorly dressed and dirty; her stepsisters remark she is not worth the money to buy clothes for anyway. She is defined, in addition to her name, by her lack of clothing (she wears rags and is barefoot) and lack of cleanliness. Narrators focus on her stepsisters' clothes either to stress *Cuzza senare*'s inferiority ("La matrigna ha vestito le sue figlie come principesse, vestite bene che non ce n'era nessuna vestita uguale"; "The stepmother dressed her daughters like princesses, dressed so well that no one was dressed like them"; Tescari 1964:110) or to highlight the contrast between "homemade" clothes (coarse and therefore socially marked) and storebought clothes, which provide less of a class indication.

If ashes and rags disguise the beauty and goodness of their heroine, then the stepsisters' *and* Cinderella's magnificent clothing is another mask which conceals their true social status and identity. The stepmother herself cannot resist using "appearance" as a temporary way into a different social class: she mortgages cows and fields to wear the gown that allows her to cross the threshold of the royal palace. Cinderella is not allowed to appear before the king in rags, but her stepmother and stepsisters would also appear out of place if wearing everyday clothes which would mark them as belonging to a lower social class. The magnificence of the stepsisters' clothing is so overwhelming that even the prince is taken in by it and dances with one of the girls before Cinderella arrives: "Vanno a ballare e il principe quando le ha viste, è andato vicino a una di queste e ha detto fra sè—che sia questa?—e ha cominciato a ballare" ("The dancing begins and when the prince saw them, he went up to one of them and said to himself—could she be the one?—and started dancing"). Then Cinderella arrives and she surpasses her stepsisters not only in beauty but in the splendor of her attire: "aveva un vestito tutto dorato, brillanti in testa, una corona, un paio di scarpette ai piedi che sembravano di vetro e luccicava dappertutto" ("she had a golden dress, diamonds in her hair, a crown, a pair of tiny shoes that seemed to be crystal and she sparkled all over") (Tescari 1964:126).

Cinderella's transfiguration is such that her own relatives are unable to recognize her. The shoes are an important detail here not only because of the sexual symbolism already discussed by so many schol-

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ars[11] but insofar as they constitute a strong marker of social class. Let us keep in mind that the marginalized and neglected Cinderella had no shoes, just as most of the children and adolescents listening to these stories did not; in the nineteenth century in some areas of Veneto people got their first real shoes on their wedding day and would wear them just before entering the church (Bazolle 1986–87). The magical acquisition of such unusual shoes, then, functions as symbolic condensation of the heroine's admission to a different social status. While the villains force the filth of ashes and the formlessness of rags on Cinderella to conceal her true being, her magic helpers (often old men and women, that is, representatives of the older generation to whom the girl entrusts herself to succeed in her rite of passage) provide her magically transfiguring clothing.

Dress is just as important in sub-type Y. In the very beginning of versions where the father persecutes the girl, some kind of accessory (her mother's wedding ring, clogs or slippers) charged with symbolic meaning marks her transition to sexual maturity, making her available to her father as a possible partner. But as the narrative unfolds, the heroine makes a more active use of clothing to achieve her own ends and assert her identity. Animal skins (sow, ox, wild boar, goat) or clothes made of bark/wood in addition to a mask of ashes and dirt protect the girl's physical and moral integrity in ten of the versions examined; in the others, plain clothes and dirt achieve the same purpose.

When seeking to be known by the prince, the sub-type Y heroine makes use of what she wears too. In some cases, she lets her ring fall into the soup or dough she is preparing for the prince who is sick with love but has not recognized her yet. Recognition rather than transfiguration is at work in this sub-type. Take the tale from Lombardy in which the girl is nicknamed "cockroach" as an extreme case. First, she insists on bringing the prince coffee in her usual dirty and torn clothes; the next time, she washes her face and he tells her she has the eyes of the girl he met at the ball; the third time, she dresses well and he recognizes her (Cirese and Serafini 1975:Lombardy 2/102).[12] Dress and appearance, which initially function as symbolic markers of the heroine's sexual maturity, serve her well to safeguard her integrity

11. See Kleinmann (1978:56–88), Lebeuf (1989:165–86) and the bibliography in Dundes (1982).

12. This version was collected by Dante Bellamio at Torrino (Pavia) in 1969. The teller, Maria Teresa Fasani, was a seventy-three-year-old peasant.

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once she has left the paternal household and to make herself known to her future husband.

Having considered spatial parameters, psychological characteristics of the heroine, nature of tasks, and thematic uses of clothing, I will conclude by stating that the intertwined but different tales of *Cuzza senare* and *Conza senare* dramatize that stage of women's lives which is the making of a destiny: youth, separation from home, the tasks of becoming an adult and ultimately the confirmation of oneself as a human being. Social or economic pressures contribute to the heroine's choosing one of two possibilities, both converging towards marriage. The first is characterized by fatalism and submission; it does not involve a break with the family; and the woman passively lets the prince choose her while "exposing" herself very cautiously at the ball. The other thematizes a quest for personal autonomy: the woman leaves her paternal home, certainly takes far greater risks than the other Cinderella, takes care of herself by working and chooses her companion and future life. This choice is, of course, limited by the "destinies" available to her in a traditional society. In all the versions examined, a third possibility is implied and to be avoided, *celibacy,* which would result from not being able to accomplish a successful initiation (this is the case of the stepsisters) and would subsequently make it impossible for the woman to leave the paternal hearth (Belmont 1989:11–31).

(Translated by Cristina Bacchilega)

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